



EU assistance to the judiciary: focus on IT support

Projects managed by the European Agency for Reconstruction

A transparent and accountable judiciary is important to safeguard fundamental rights and it is a *sine qua non* for European accession. The EU has provided more than €11 million in support to judicial reform in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia since 2002. The bulk of that assistance is managed by the European Agency for Reconstruction, and aims to strengthen the independence, effectiveness and efficiency of the judiciary.

EU overall assistance to judicial reform

The EU has supported key elements of the country's judicial reform strategy, including improving the efficiency of the court system and judicial administration; providing training to judicial staff; and ensuring judicial integrity and independence. Highlights of this work include:

- A training component is included in all EC programmes in order to develop the professional capacity of legal staff. The Agency is also boosting the country's own ability to train staff by helping to set up the Academy for Training of Judges and Prosecutors. Under the first phase of this project, a law on the establishment of the new body was produced; proposals were drafted for amendments to other related laws and the Constitution; curricula designed for mandatory initial training and continuous training of judges and prosecutors; and pilot training programmes launched for judges and prosecutors. The second phase provides ongoing support to boosting the Academy's institutional capacities in terms of ensuring the independence of the judiciary and elaborating a transparent and merit-based recruitment and appointment system.
- An Agency-managed 'twinning' with the Italian Ministry of Justice is providing extensive capacity building support to the specialised Unit for the Fight against Organised Crime and Corruption, established within the Public Prosecutor's Office.
- A Court Information System was installed in all 28 courts in the country (26 basic and 2 appellate courts) and other judicial institutions. The computerisation of courts will allow for more efficient case management, leading to a reduction of the huge backlog of cases.



A focus on IT support to the judiciary

In 2002 the EU provided €2 million to reform the court system and judicial administration. Initiatives included providing automated administrative support systems for courts and public prosecutors, and supporting the professional development of judges and expert associates. This has continued under the Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilisation (CARDS) programme, with €2.5 million provided in IT support. EU support has targeted:

- Establishing and developing a sustainable caseload processing capacity within the public prosecutor's offices, the prison administration and the Court Council;
- Improving the accessibility of laws and case law by the judiciary; and
- Improving the capacities of the public prosecutor's offices, the prison administration and the Judicial Council.

Legal database and judicial information system

In order to introduce automated applications, a €1 million EU technical assistance project helped to develop a Legal Data Base Information System (LDBIS) and upgrade the existing Judicial Information System (JIS). This support will ensure, inter alia, more precise electronic statistics concerning the inflow of new cases and cases pending in the three pilot judicial institutions, in particular in each of their departments and with each judge and prosecutor. To reduce the backlog of cases, automated applications must now be further developed in order to discontinue the use of manual administration.

From November 2006 to February 2007, the upgraded JIS applications were handed over to the Skopje Public Prosecutor's Office, the Directorate for Prison Administration – Skopje and Idrizovo prisons, and the Judicial Council. The Supreme Court will host the main LDBIS, whereas a mirror LDBIS will be installed in the IT Centre for the Judiciary. The applications developed will provide the judicial institutions online access to all laws and by-laws and selected case law.

A new IT Centre for the judiciary

The plan to set up a complete network linking the IT systems in the courts, prosecutor's offices, penitentiary institutions, Ministry of Justice, and the Judicial Council was announced for the first time in the *National Strategy for the Reform of the Judicial System* adopted in November 2004.

The EU through the Agency provided €300,000 to refurbish and equip the IT Centre for the Judiciary. The assistance included providing a video surveillance system, telephone and IT support equipment, and office furniture. The idea behind this project is to merge all data from judicial institutions across the country in this Centre, thus improving accessibility, efficiency and coordination.

The IT Centre is now enshrined in the country's new Law on Courts (in force since 1 January 2007), and also in the *National Strategy for Information and Communication Technology*, which sets out the priorities of the Ministry of Justice and the entire judiciary for the period 2007–10.



Before and after the refurbishment of the IT Centre for the Judiciary

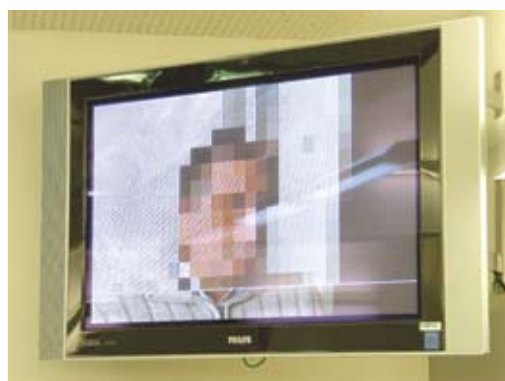
Hardware provided

Under another €1 million EU-funded project to provide hardware, the Ministry of Justice and judicial institutions across the country have been put together under a single optical Wide Area Network (WAN) connection, ITVPN. The courts' and prosecutors' offices, the prison administration, the Judicial Council, the Ministry of Justice and the IT Centre have also been supplied with 10 servers and 500 desktop PCs with TFT monitors, 24 laptop PCs, 240 local printers and 50 network printers.

The WAN established through this assistance is unique in the Western Balkans in covering the entire territory of the country.

Introducing protection of witnesses

As part of the EU's support to the 2003 *National Action Plan for the Fight against Organised Crime*, in particular its "Regional Justice Co-operation" measure, €200,000 worth of videoconferencing and security surveillance equipment was provided. This equipment contributed to the conversion of Basic Court Skopje 1, the biggest court in the country, into a court dealing solely with criminal cases. It will become a modernised court in line with the EU and international best standards and practices providing the necessary protection for witnesses and bringing perpetrators to justice. This initiative will support the implementation of the 2004 Law on Witness Protection and foster regional co-operation as an essential element in fighting organised crime and corruption.



State-of-the-art witness protection equipment

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The European Agency for Reconstruction is responsible for the management of the main EU assistance programmes in the Republic of Serbia (including UN-administered Kosovo), the Republic of Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.